ALL IN THE FAMILY

April 17, 1988

11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Genesis 11:1-9
Luke 2:41-51

"and when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it." -Luke 2:43 (RSV)

Revelation and new understanding can come with startling suddenness and in unlikely circumstances. Recently I learned something new about the Bible on "family" - and about Jesus' relationship with his mother. On a visit to the Art Institute we did something innovative. Instead of heading for the Impressionists like homing pigeons, we walked up the other stairs and into the wing containing the classics of the Middle Ages. Almost all of those great paintings deal with biblical topics, many of them with Jesus. We stopped in front of one: A Marriage at Cana, by Giuseppe Maria Cresti, painted in 1686. You know the story: the first miracle in John's Gospel, when the wine ran out at a wedding party and Mary asked her son to do something about it, whereupon he changed water into wine. The painting is larger than life, stylized, romanticized. It catches the moment, I think, when Mary is telling Jesus about the sudden embarrassing dilemma of their host and asking if he can't do something. He is looking at her with a unique, baleful expression. The person with whom I was standing, herself a mother of grown children, said: "Look - she's just said - 'Do something about it' and he's saying... 'Mother!'"

This sermon is about "family." It is based on the premise, which needs constant reinforcing because it isn't always comforting, that the Bible is very realistic about the institution of the family.

Until recently my assumption, shared widely, I believe - was that a focus on family from the pulpit these days, or in church programming, is not nearly as relevant as it once was. The church in the past decade or so finally realized that it was not a "family institution," at least in the way it liked to think of itself. "Look at your members," the experts said. We did. And we were shocked. Most of them, we discovered, were single - unmarried, widowed, widowers, divorced. Even family churches in the suburbs were surprised to discover the data - that the majority of their members were single.

The Nuclear Family - father, mother and children, living together - is a fairly small minority of the total church constituency. So not wanting to be irrelevant and wanting to be inclusive (and Presbyterians will do anything to be relevant and inclusive) many of us stopped making erroneous assumptions about what the church is - a good idea, and stopped talking about family - a not so good idea, it turns out. Just as we were starting to ignore the "family" in the name of relevance and inclusiveness, television was rediscovering its importance. All in the Family was an important cultural event for many reasons, among them a reminder that many, many people are still intrigued by the dynamics of family. That phenomenon continues - most recently on The Cosby Show.

Professor Elizabeth Achtemeier wrote in a new book for preachers:

> "The persons who face Christian preachers every Sunday morning usually have few principle concerns. They are concerned about their daily work and they are concerned about their family relationships." [Preaching About Family Relationships, p. 9]

Is that true? As I put that book aside I picked up the New York Times Book Review, April 10, 1988. The lead review was on a book about a long love affair between the author's parents. I continued leafing through with Professor Achtemeier's suggestion now moving from back to front burner. In that one publication, there are at least eight major new books dealing, in one way or another, with family issues... marriage and death of a spouse - the lasting impact of a strong father - Parentcare, a guide for adult children - feminism.

So just maybe we have overreacted. Maybe family remains a major issue for many, if not all of us: a biological, social, economic and spiritual issue. Even though the institution has changed, perhaps we have been less than attentive to its remaining significance.

All of that contributed to a new understanding of a favorite Bible story, our lesson today. It is the only incident in the New Testament that says anything about the time between Jesus' birth and infancy and thirty years later, when his public ministry begins. When he was twelve Mary and Joseph took him to Jerusalem for Passover. When they returned to Nazareth, Jesus was not with them. They assumed he was with friends or other relatives. At the end of the day, however, he still wasn't there. They looked, asked about him, finally turned around and walked all the way back to Jerusalem. They looked all day, desperate by now. If you have ever tried to go to sleep at night without knowing where your son or daughter is, you know how thick the plot has become. After three days of it - anger, worry, despair, grief - they find him in the Temple, talking with teachers. Traditionally this story is told to show how smart the twelve year old Jesus was. This time around I was startled by what I now believe the point of it is - and the reason Luke tells it... Listen again -

> "And when they saw him they were astonished and his mother said to him, 'Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously.'"

Do you hear that? Not "praise God, our son is safe - doing good things in church." But "Did it ever occur to you, young man, that you're not the only one in this family? Did it ever occur to you that your father and I have feelings too? Why, we haven't slept for three nights: we've worried ourselves sick. Don't you care at all about us?"

And Jesus answered them, "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my father's house?"

Can you hear that? "Mother! I'm twelve years old. I can be where I want to be. Stop smothering me."

Luke concludes: "And (his parents) did not understand."

I'll say! Who ever did understand the wonderful necessities of adolescence; the emerging autonomy and independence, so much a part of God's plan and so very painful when it's you - or your teenager? "We don't understand that at all. What we understand are the rules and the rules are that you check in with us before you go off like that again."

> "and his mother kept all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man."

The family has changed - radically. John Updike, who has a finger on the pulse of our culture, writes about it a lot. In a short story, Still Of Some Use, a divorced man and woman and their grown son are cleaning out the attic of the house in which they once lived... They pitch the old games they used to play, each with a part missing, out the attic window into the back of a pickup truck. When they hit, the boxes explode and the parts fly off in every direction. At the end the father and son drive off in the pickup truck to the dump. Family - parts missing - exploded - discarded. [Trust Me, p. 27]

Futurist Robert Francoeur wrote a very clever essay about the demise of the family and the Victorian culture which gave it its shape. He borrows the vocabulary of anthropology and describes the fading of the Victi (Victorian) tribe and the emergence of a new tribe, the Nanus. The Victis, he says, lived a hard life. They spent most of their time living in overpopulated cities, in crowded sheds, forty, fifty, sixty stories above the ground, dressed in curious uniforms characterized by useless buttons on their collars and peculiar, ornamental pieces of cloth tied tightly around their necks... The men were breadwinners. Sex roles were strong and there wasn't much leisure among the Victi.

The emerging tribe, unlike the Victi, espouses sexual equality, marriage happens much later and they are very open about sex. Young men and women are sent off to their own "villages" known as colleges, where

they can freely cohabit for four or five years without interference from their elders. The new culture is not as addicted to work as the Victi - but both show evidence of heavy drug use.

The Victis were chemically addicted to tobacco and alcohol, both fatal substances which killed them with systematic frequency. The new tribe discovered a grass-like substance and other assorted powders which kill them with even more frequency. [The Futurist, April 1980, The Sexual Revolution]

It helps to laugh at change because much of it, in this case, is not amusing: the demise of the extended family, for instance. A friend of mine, in his mid-fifties, was telling me how empty his life is with the departure of the last child. "It's deathly quiet. I have leftover love - lot's of it."

For millennia, "family" has described a social unit consisting of at least three generations, genetically related, and also geographically related, sometimes living on the same farm, in the same house. That changed during our life time. My grandfather ate in our home every Friday night. I knew my cousins and saw aunts and uncles every week. My children see theirs every few years. The late Margaret Meade observed that the "Nuclear Family," mother and father and children, standing alone, cut off from extended family, is a recent invention and not a very good one.

All the weight which was once born by all the relatives now rests on two people and increasingly one person, often living in a strange place with few close friends. We are asking the nuclear family to stand alone and it wasn't designed for that.

There are even more serious consequences. In a sense American culture has always been a kind of conspiracy against black families. With a few exceptions, the two hundred year institution of slavery was determined to destroy the family bonds of those who were brought over in chains. One hundred years of segregation, humiliation and legal discrimination was a focused assault on the institution of marriage and the personhood of black men, particularly. We legalized the removal of pride, autonomy and power of man, then have the audacity to wonder what happened to the family. And a quarter of a century under a welfare system that further encourages the demise of family and marriage has virtually completed the tragic assault. 20% of the white babies and 60% of the black babies born this year will enter life without the stability of married parents; the vast majority of fathers will not be around. There is no scandal that even approaches this one in terms of cost and human pain.

Here is how Time Magazine describes the prospects for those 60% of all black babies born to unmarried, teen-age mothers:

> "As infants, they have high rates of illness and mortality. Later in life they often experience educational and emotional problems. Many are victims of child abuse at the hands of parents too immature to understand why their baby is crying or how

their doll-like plaything has suddenly developed a will of its own. Finally, these children of children are prone to dropping out and becoming teen-age parents themselves." [see op. cit. Achtemeier, p. 24]

We are paying and will pay an enormous price for racism and for the demise of the family in the subculture of poverty. The tragedy is that we know at least part of the resolution, but our ideological zeal prevents us from implementing it. (Or is it simply selfishness?) We know that providing pre-natal care, pediatric health care, nutritional assistance guidance counseling, day care - saves money, lots of money. We know that we are the only nation in the Western world without public support of Day Care Centers. We know that public schools are, for many youngsters, the only structure, the only hope and we don't want to support them if it will cost us more money.

What saves me from despair, and you really need to know this part too, is that the human spirit somehow keeps emerging out of that demonic and self-perpetuating system we have created, with courage and love and grace. It happens here three times a week at least. Parents love their children and care about them and keep trying. Children keep coming to Tutoring. Do you have any idea how difficult it is and how brave they have to be... walking, many of them ten blocks, hoping not to be hassled, beat up, shot, - through the crowds and traffic of Division Street and Rush Street, over gang boundaries - just to spend time with a tutor.

When I despair, I take a walk through the Tutoring Program. I commend it to you. It will lift your spirit.

Also, good therapy for despair over the family is an honest look at the Bible on the topic. We labor, I think, under the illusion of a Victorian ideal. Family was never what we thought it should be. What a relief it was to discover that yours wasn't the only family where devotions never really worked; that as soon as you tried to read Scripture at the table, someone stuck a finger in the gravy, or poured salt in the little brother's milk, or for no reason - began to giggle. Erma Bombeck is good therapy for romantics about family. But so is the Bible.

The primal family, after all, is a disaster area. Adam and Eve contribute to each other's moral downfall. One of their sons murders his brother. Noah was discovered in a drunken stupor by his sons and cursed one of them. Abraham loaned his wife to Pharoh for a while to buy a little time for himself in Egypt. Jacob deceives his father, defrauds his brother and his sons leave their brother, Joseph, to die in the desert. David commits adultery and arranges a murder to cover his tracks. His children are guilty of incest, betrayal and his commander-in-chief assassinates his beloved son Absalom - who was leading a political insurrection against his father. David's cry "O my son, Absalom, my son, my son Absalom," penetrates the heart of everyone who ever had - or ever was - a son or daughter.

The Bible is honest and realistic about the human family, including the Holy Family. From the perspective of family issues, the Jesus story

includes an unmarried pregnancy, a rebellious adolescent, a single parent home, an adult male living a single life, a continuing relationship with a mother and at the last, a son taking care of and making provisions for an aging parent. [See "What Is A Christian Family," Willie S. Teague, in Weavings, Jan.-Feb. 1988]

It is, that is to say, an incarnational issue... a God in the human flesh issue. We have looked at it this morning from the bottom up, as it were; from the vantage point of family. But the central Christian affirmation is that God is the major actor. God is choosing to reveal, to disclose himself in this story. God is choosing the human family to reveal life-giving, life-enhancing and life-saving truth.

It was Martin Luther who rediscovered that. The Middle Ages were convinced that God is more involved and more accurately seen in monastic life, cloistered life, celibate life. It was Luther who married, first of all in order to prove a point about the sanctity of home and family; and then, happily, he fell in love with the woman he married. It was Luther who chided a friend for placing a cherry bough in his dining room to remind him of God's blessings. "Why don't you think of your children," Luther said. "They are in front of you all the time, and you will learn from them, more than a cherry bough." [Roland Bainton, "Here I Stand," p. 236 - in Weavings, Jan./Feb. 88, p. 2, John Mugabgab]

Family - the family we once were, or still are - is where we learn the human and spiritual essentials. We learn them there, either because of their presence or their absence.

In family, we learn about the absolute centrality of grace. Family is a reminder that we didn't create ourselves, or work our way into existence: two people, in God's gift of human love, conceived us. Grace, we learned early, means life. Someone carried us for nine months, bore us, tended to us, fed us, protected us, taught us.

In family we learned about community, life together: that with growth comes demand, that there is law and gospel, rules to follow and expectations to meet. In family we learned that we are in debt to - obligated to - something other than ourselves; and that we are not the only human being in any picture.

In family we learned that absolute necessity of acceptance and forgiveness. We learned by making mistakes, breaking rules, falling short of parental hopes - that our failures do not condemn us; that there is love ever ready to grant us the benefit of the doubt, another chance.

We know now that one of the adult tasks for each of us - is to love our parents and as adults, learn to accept them and extend grace to them and... to forgive them. Someone has said that you are not an adult until you can forgive your parents; forgive them for being human... until you can be realistic about your expectations of them - as they were about you, fortunately. It is never too late for that, by the way; and it is one of the most important tasks each of us has to do.

Your family is part of the legacy of life. You never will leave it. It is a part of who you are. You and I spend the rest of our lives either affirming the grace, demand and forgiveness we were given - or struggling with its absence. Your first thought and your last thought will probably be about your family.

Family is where our humanity is celebrated at its best and exposed at its worst. Family is where human love is strongest and where human betrayal is most painful.

So -

- Be grateful for your family, whatever it was, or is. Know that God intends human life to be conceived and nurtured in a family - your life.

- Forgive your parents, whether they are alive or not, in the sanctuary of your soul, make peace with them. Forgive them.

- And then, if they are alive, tell them you love them. Say it. "I love you." Say it often. Don't wait till its too late. If it is, say it to whoever is family to you.

- Do something about the family crisis in our culture. Vote, write letters, donate money, care, change, become a brave advocate for this precious and endangered thing - family.

- Become family with those God gives you - related to you biologically, or not. See this church as potential family. See people here as brothers, sisters, parents, grandparents.

One of my teachers, Ross Snyder, once said: "a family is a center of healing, a place where you can see that everybody else is on your side, a group of people who actively approve of each other..."

We are all in the family... God's family.

The shape of things to come is not altogether clear.

What is clear is God's love, God's investment in this dear institution... God's grace toward us and our privilege - our opportunity - our responsibility - of extending that grace to one another...

God bless us on our way... Amen.